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Showcasing an Alternative Educational Systems Using the Philosophy of Ulul Albab

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ABSTRACT

Imtiaz schools, which have become a household name and craze among parents who want to send their children there to study, has become a determining factor for a need to initiate a research to evaluate how far the founding objectives have materilized into actions and reality. Besides carrying out a research with the objective of determining the positive aspects of these schools, which have earned a name of being an integrated leaning institution, a comprehensive profile of these Imtiaz schools could be structured and propagated to all interested parties at the end of the research. Qualitative data was obtained from interviews with the school's management, Terangganu Foundation as the authority in-charge of Imtiaz schools, general interviews and focus group discussions with teachers, students and parents in order to examine the actual implementation and achievement of all the targeted objectives. All the information gathered in this research had achieved and fulfilled the objectives of the research. The research found that the student's and teacher's understanding and appreciation towards the school's mission and vision was clear. The concept of virtuosity (a.k.a the Ulul Albab Concept) which has been vociferated and hailed, has been acknowledged by students and teachers of its existence and has been transformed into the lessons, learning and all the activities that have been planned and implemented. The process of assessing students, co-curriculum activities and involvement with the community has become the catalyst to the success and achievement of the targeted objectives.

Key words: Imtiaz schools, curriculum, ulul albab, learning programe

1. BACKGROUND

The idea behind the formation of the Imtiaz School (*School of Excellence*) was sparked by Dato' Seri Idris bin Jusoh on 31 Mei 1996, who was then the Deputy Minister of Development and Entrepreneurship. A program called "*Smart al-Qur'an*" was held to guide and test the ability of kindergarten children in mastering the reciting of the al-Qur'an in Besut, Terengganu (Wan Ahmad Zakry, 2007:6). After having a brain storming session with academics,

professionals and a working trip overseas, eventually on 9th January 1999, the Imtiaz School was formed and started operations in Besut with a pioneering intake of 28 students.

Formation of the Imtiaz School is based on the *Ulul Albab* concept which is an inviolable effort to deliver a group of intelligentsia who can memorize 30 components (*juzuk*) of the al-Qur'an, understand its meaning, possess a wide spectrum of general knowledge, have the ability to cogitate and observe the creations of Allah SWT through the eyes, heart and incisive mind and to take cognisance from it (Inscribe History to Create Civilization: A Journey, 2007:1).

According to Wan Ahmad Zakry (2007:6), Chief Executive Officer of Integriti Icon Sdn. Bhd., who heads the Imtiaz School, the secondary school level institute of learning carries the challenge to deliver human capital that can grandiose the al-Qur'an and the al-Sunnah as the pillars of life. The main goal is to deliver a *Ulul Alhab* generation that has the characteristics of being *qur'anic*, *encyclopedic* and *ijtihadic*, which has been assimilated into the Imtiaz learning curriculum.

The students are exposed to a memorizing program with a set target of memorizing 30 components (*juzuk*) of the al-Qur'an for 3 years (Form 1 to 3) and to repeat the memorization when they are in Form 4 and 5. Emphasis on the encyclopedic elements involves academic activity related to science, technology, mathematics, language and so forth. Co-curriculum activities in Imtiaz offers various activities such as archery, horse riding, *silat*, uniform associations and many more. The emphasis on the *ijtihadic* character will have the students involved and guided in creative and innovative activities through technologically complex activities like avionics, robotics and solarics. At the moment Imtiaz has five schools, which are Imtiaz Besut, Imtiaz Dungun, Imtiaz Kuala Berang, Imtiaz Kuala Terengganu and the latest is Imtiaz Kemaman. The government has targeted 10% of the students from Imtiaz to eventually become the '*cream of the cream*' (Ahmad Ikram, 2007:17).

1.1 Objectives of the Imtiaz School Curriculum

In order to create an *Ulul Albab* generation, the Imtiaz School has prepared a curriculum that gives benefit to the national curriculum. A framework of the objectives has been listed and a few added subjects have been ascribed in the school curriculum. To achieve the goal of creating an *Ulul Albab* generation, the Imtiaz School has outlined a few objectives of its curriculum such as follows:

- i) To create and mould many *Ulul Albab*'s with Qur'anic, encyclopedic and *ijtihadic* characters.
- ii) To make Terengganu a prestigious state with the most distinguished al-Qur'an learning center in Malaysia.

- iii) To provide facilities and modern educational infrastructure for learning the al-Qur'an and Science and Technology fields to ensure the excellent achievement of students in the fields of religion and science.
- iv) To provide alternative education to students who have an interest in science and the al-Qur'an to ensure continuity and synergy in their education. (Imtiaz School syllables, 2008).

1.2 Special Criteria for the Imtiaz School Curriculum

There are three criteria that are emphasized in the Imtiaz curriculum. It portrays the *Ulul Albab* characteristics that are desired to be molded based on the interpretation of the *Ulul Albab* concept, which has been subscribed from the holy al-Qur'an al-Karim. The criteria are as follows:

Qur'anic: This not only means those who have memorized the al-Qur'an and the 30 components (*juzuk*) of the al-Qur'an but they should also have extensive knowledge of the al-Qur'an regarding its orderly reading, intonations and practice the teachings of the al-Qur'an itself.

Encyclopedic: This means the ability to command multi-discipline knowledge and be multilingual.

Ijtihadic: This reflects the characteristics of one who is able to give opinions and solve problems related to the *ummah*; posses elements of creativity, innovativeness and cognitive skills and consequently utilize the combination of these elements to command the wisdom of religion and science.

The affirmation of these three special criteria is to ascertain the form and elements that will be ascribed into the school curriculum. It can be said that the affirmation of these three *Ulul Albab* criteria have never been seen so vividly and cohesively in any academic literature in Islamic civilization before this.

1.3 The Contents of the Imtiaz School Curriculum

The contents of the Imtiaz School curriculum are the combination of four features, which are the national curriculum, the *diniyyah* curriculum, the memorizing of the al-Qur'an and the co-curriculum. Overall, the Imtiaz School curriculum is as follows:

- i) National Curriculum: It provides subjects that are offered in the main stream schools such as communicative Arab language, higher level Arab language, Malay language, English language, English for science and technology, science, physics, biology, chemistry, mathematics, additional mathematics, integrated living skills, Islamic studies, al-Qur'an and al-Sunnah studies, *Islamiah Syariah* studies, history, geography, information technology and civic studies.

- ii) *Diniyyah* Curriculum: It provides subjects that are usually offered by secondary religious schools (*I'dadi* subjects) such as *Tajwid*, *Tafsir* (translation), *Hadith*, *Nahu* (pronunciation/grammar rules), *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and *Tauhid* (Islamic monotheism).
- iii) *Hafazan* (memorizing) al-Qur'an Program: The Imtiaz School students will be given guidance on memorizing the al-Qur'an so that they would eventually become an *al-hafiz* (one who has memorized the al-Qur'an) when they finish their schooling later on. The program is as follows: Students in Form 1 need to memorize components (*juzuk*) 1-10 within 15 weeks, students in Form 2 need to memorize components (*juzuk*) 11-20 within 15 weeks, students in Form 3 need to memorize components (*juzuk*) 21-30 within 15 weeks. While the students in Form 4 and 5 need to revise their memorization of the 30 components (*juzuk*) of the al-Qur'an to ensure their memory is indeed good.
- iv) Co-curriculum: The uniform units in Imtiaz Schools are the Scouts, Fire Brigade cadets, Police cadets, Princesses of Islam (*Puteri Islam*), the Red Crescent Society and Youth cadets. Clubs and associations that exist are Solar and Avionics, Aeronautical and Robotics, clubs according to subjects taught, Heart of al-Qur'an, Swimming, Archery and Horse riding. Meanwhile, the sports available for the students are soccer, badminton, table tennis, netball, volleyball and *sepak takraw* (Imtiaz School Syllabus, 2008).

Based on the four items stated above, it is found that the Imtiaz School curriculum was drafted in accordance with the objectives and special criteria that had been laid out. Elements that clearly differentiate this school's curriculum with the national schools are the religious subjects, the memorizing of 30 components (*juzuk*) of the al-Qur'an and a few co-curriculums such as solar, aeronautics, avionics and robotics. According to Ahmad Ikram (2007:17), it is the hope of the Imtiaz management that 10% of their students would eventually emerge as the '*cream of the cream*' in the nation's development.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study was initiated to achieve its main objective, which is to evaluate the achievement of the Imtiaz School's objectives, to assess the efficacy of the Imtiaz School's programs and eventually build a profile of the Imtiaz School's unique character.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Discussing the *Ulul Albab* generation, its characters and criteria, Sabri Mohd Sharif (2009) in his book entitled "*The Ulul Albab Generation: A Mountain of Hope, A Substantiated Conception*", had detailed it in seven chapters and also examined critically 16 criteria based on the sayings and depictions in the holy al-Qur'an.

"*Ulul Albab: Concept and Meaning According to Syarak*" by Zulkifli Mohamad al-Bakri (2006) had analyzed the word '*Ulul Albab*' found in the al-Qur'an and in the last chapter had given a few examples of individuals who could be called '*Ulul Albab*'.

Shukery Mohamed (2011) had carried out a study on secondary school innovative curriculums by using the Imtiaz secondary school as a case study. The study was carried out by monitoring, on-the-ground or first-hand observation and interviews with administrators, teachers, students and parents. The study concluded that the involvement and immense desire of the state leaders in wanting to see the Imtiaz School to succeed was the secret behind the successful achievement. The Imtiaz innovative curriculum is one innovation that utilizes the top-bottom model. With a stable and comfortable financial position, Imtiaz had been very proactive in organizing various seminars, in-service trainings, workshops, academic colloquiums and various co-curriculum activities.

Parents too had played an important role in conveying opinions and motivating their children. Imtiaz practices an open school policy for parents whereby they could come to school at any time for a discussion with the administrator or teachers while monitoring the development of their children from a near. The spectacular uniqueness of the Imtiaz School is seen here when although hailed as an elite school, it is owned by the community. This sense of ownership has made all the parents want to see and be proud of the excellence of the Imtiaz School. All the success achieved has become a shared entity.

The students are encouraged to follow and partake in social service programs or school community programs (as part of the school's social responsibility). This nature of practices and policies would eventually bring about strong bonded alumni associations that would together bear the responsibility of creating a class of *Ulul Albab* and ascertain that the Imtiaz School continues its excellence on the world's stage.

4. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The study on evaluation and effectiveness of an education policy was implemented intensively in order to enhance the level of education and teaching process.

On realizing the uniqueness of this institution, a research needs to be initiated to evaluate how far the objectives for forming this institution have translated into actions and reality. The research is also motivated to look into the strengths of this school that has enabled this school to carve itself a name as an integrated educational institution. These two objectives would enable the researchers to formulate and prepare a comprehensive profile on the Imtiaz School.

The qualitative data were obtained through the following modes:

- a. Interviews with the management of the Imtiaz School and the Terengganu Foundation. (The latter being the body responsible for overseeing the Imtiaz Schools).

- b. Interviews and focus group discussions (FGD) with teachers, students and parents in order to look into the implementation and actual achievements of the targeted objectives.

Focus group Discussion (FGD) is one tool or method used to collect qualitative data from group discussions. A facilitator would manage and facilitate a discussion by using a set of guided questions. The aim of a FGD is to collect detailed qualitative information about perception, attitudes and experiences of target groups pertaining to a matter at hand (phenomenon) that has been identified. The target group identified in this research was made up of an ideal number of 10-12 people (Zulkifli A. Manaf, 2004).

The collected data was combined together and analyzed to determine if the Imtiaz School had indeed achieved its stated objectives, besides identifying the school's uniqueness, strengths and weaknesses.

5. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study would involve two schools, which is the Imtiaz School in Besut and in Kuala Terengganu. The selection of schools was made to enable a comparison between two schools that were formed based on different characteristics. The Imtiaz School in Besut was a new school, specially formed to implement the system and the Imtiaz teaching programs. Meanwhile, the Imtiaz School in Kuala Terengganu was a school taken over from the Islamic Science College, Terengganu. Moreover, the Terengganu Foundation, which functions as a implementation and monitoring body, was the target of this study for purposes of obtaining administration and management data.

5.1 Findings of The Study

All the information obtained in this study had achieved and fulfilled the objectives of this study. With the aspiration and intention of substantiating the standing of the Imtiaz School as an institution of learning that offers excellent educational appraisal, besides emphasizing the integrated educational concept as a significant vehicle or avenue towards delivering a generation of *Ulul Albab*. Hence, the findings of this study are reported and arranged according to the headings as shown below.

i) Vision and Mission of the school

Through the focus group discussion, which was held among teachers and students, it was found that both the groups knew and understood the vision and mission of the Imtiaz School although they could not recall the contents fully. When asked, they could explain in detail, among others, the vision and its contents that is intended to create a generation of *Ulul Albab* with three targeted criteria: Qur'anic, Encyclopedic and *Ijtihadic*, creating citizens with a first class mentality, global Muslim leaders, smart *soleh* (pious) students, to become society's references and intelligent in solving problems. The students felt that the learning process that they went through was based on the concept of a combination between the Qur'an and other disciplines.

ii) Asserting the concept of *Ulul Albab* in Teaching and Learning

Imtiaz provides an integrated system of learning according to the integrated curriculum of secondary schools under the Ministry of Education, Malaysia (KBSM); and the *Diniyyah* subjects and *Hafazan* al-Qur'an programs according to the *Huffaz* method, which consists of main subjects, elective subjects and special *Ulul Albab* subjects. Each subject is taught holistically and is related to all the three curriculum categories as above.

Through the FGD the researchers obtained the following information:

1. The students obtained guidance from within and without the classroom whereby aspects pertaining to knowledge, understanding, application and appreciation were emphasized.
2. During the first five months, the student would go through the personality module. This is a special basic *Ulul Albab* program where the student memorizes *surah's* and understands its meaning. Incentives are given as a continuous form of encouragement and support. A reward is given to students who can memorize the al-Qur'an in a form of RM10 for anyone who can completely recite (*khatam*) the al-Qur'an within a certain period and RM1000 for anyone who successfully memorizes the whole Qur'an.
3. Students need to produce their own creation with the guidance of their teachers who constantly train their creatively and innovatively.
4. Students are exposed to activities pertaining to language within and without the classroom.
5. Teachers are constantly given training to upgrade their professionalism while they themselves need to appreciate the *Ulul Albab* concept.
6. Teachers guide students using the Future Study approach, having a competitive spirit and inviting them to think 'beyond the box'.
7. The *Schoolwide Enrichment Model* (SEM) is made a compulsory course for Form 1 students. Meanwhile, students in Form 2 to 5 participate in the *co-academic activity*. With the SEM, all students have to form groups to produce research teams.
8. Teachers teach beyond what is stated in the syllabus, while students are guided to carry out self-study.

iii) Student Assessment Process

Based on the information given, Imtiaz teachers adopt the concept of approaching and being cordial with the students. Students are looked upon as their own children. Teachers know each student and their achievements. This will enable them to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the student and consequently identify the source of the weakness for further remedial action.

1. 'Item analysis' is one technique used to identify the student's weakness. Students are asked to formulate questions at the end of the learning sessions and send them to the teacher for checking.
2. Students are placed in intended groups and the groups are constantly evaluated every month based on aspects such as academic, personality and so forth. Through the distinguished personality program, a *naqib* is appointed who will give the marks based on the marking criteria prepared in a special form.
3. Co-curriculum, the al-Qur'an and academics are always evaluated by examinations and course work. Disciplinary action would jeopardize group marks and lead to deductions in group marks.
4. Teaching and learning is not centered on the teacher. Each student is a mentor for every subject. Mentors are chosen among senior students who are presumed to be young teachers.
5. Students are trained to deliver the *tazkirah* (minor sermons) whereby every student needs to be prepared with particular topics to be delivered in small groups. Students are taught to be independent in solving their assignments and teachers would act as a guide only.

iv. Co-curriculum activities

Co-curriculum activities play a role in developing a school that wishes to churn out students of excellence. In the Imtiaz context, which wishes to churn out smart *soleh* students, the co-curriculum activities are different from the co-curriculum in normal schools. Imtiaz offers much more co-curriculum courses through academic clubs such as the Solar Club, Falak Club and Aeronautic and Robotic club. Clubs like these promise to deliver smart and excellent students in the field of science and produce new creations.

Besides that, Imtiaz is the forerunner to the archery, equine and swimming clubs. They are also involved in debating competitions akin to the parliament, have become district level champions for Kuala Terengganu South District, and will take part in bigger and more prestigious competitions to come.

Students are trained to be independent in carrying out co-curriculum activities and teachers act as a guide only. They have received recognition for a few co-curriculum activities, among them being the *solaric charger*, which obtained recognition from UTM.

In the field of sports, Imtiaz is capable of competing at state and national levels. In chess, Imtiaz had been placed 30th at the international level. Imtiaz students had represented the state and the country in chess competitions. In 2010, Imtiaz was declared the champion in volleyball at the national Islamic secondary school level and Imtiaz students had represented the state in netball.

In the cultural field, it is not specifically limited to the Malay culture and they have explored other cultures too. Hence, the cultural activities conducted are in line with the vision and mission of the Imtiaz School.

Students in Imtiaz are trained and encouraged to participate in community programs, for example, attending *tahlil* functions in nearby villages and other religious events held together with the surrounding communities. They are trained to become *imams* during prayers, to head *tahlil* prayers and so forth.

v. Students and Daily Activities

Students start their daily routine by reciting the holy al-Qur'an before starting their academic classes and co-curriculum activities. The morning session ends at 12.30 in the afternoon. Students must take the *qailulah*, which is an afternoon nap or *siesta* before performing their *Zohor* prayers.

The afternoon session starts at 2.30 in the afternoon and ends at 4.30 in the evening. At 5.30 in the evening, it is compulsory for students to take part in recreational programs. After *Maghrib* prayers is the *tazkirah* session. Students have to perform the prayers in a group (*berjemaah*) and recite the *al-Mulk Surah* before going to bed.

vi. Imtiaz's Mission statement

All parties including teachers, parents and students hope that Imtiaz, as an institution, has the potential to progress forward, achieve its aspirations and realize its dreams. A few indicators have shown this to be a certainty; among them is the increase in student applications from all over the country at every new enrollment session. In fact, there has been foreign interest in wanting to open up similar institutions in their countries too. The Imtiaz concept has also been assimilated by a few chosen MRSM's in the country.

vii. The Catalyst in Imtiaz's Activities

The undivided support from the state government, which readily provides financial assistance and infrastructure in the form of new school buildings, tremendously helps the smooth flow of activities. The open school and dormitory concept has brought in volunteering parents who can come to the school at anytime to contribute their expertise skills or even make a financial contribution to the school.

The teachers themselves are a dedicated lot, committed to their vocation. They readily take in the role of parents of these students. More telling is the spontaneous eagerness and enthusiastic spirit shown by the students. An inner drive and thirst for knowledge makes them strive even harder.

viii. Challenges that may jeopardize the progress of Imtiaz

Every institution under the auspices of the government would eventually have some short- comings contrary to its positive points. Lamenting and complains from the employees have to be given due attention by the administration. The staff's welfare should also be looked into, as this would surely guarantee a determined workforce and quality output. The

employer should render priority to questions regarding human resource management such as position within the organization, remuneration and promotions.

6. CONCLUSION

Based on the data collected and after meticulously pondering over the aims and goals of this study, it was found that all the research questions targeted by the researcher had met and fulfilled the objectives.

It is hoped that the results of this study would benefit the related parties responsible to substantiate the Imtiaz School, which upholds the concept of integrated education as a significant avenue in bringing forth a generation of *Ulul Albab* students. The results of this study would also be publicized in article papers and working paper presentations locally and abroad. The Imtiaz school profile would be produced as a guide for the government in its effort to prepare a better educational system as characterized by *Ulul Albab*.

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